



Beyond the Three Rs  
Voter Attitudes toward  
21st Century Skills



PARTNERSHIP FOR  
21ST CENTURY SKILLS



<b>Voter Attitudes toward 21st Century Skills</b>	<b>I</b>
<b>Young People Need More than the Three Rs</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Gaps between Skills Voters Value and How Well Schools Teach These Skills</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>21st Century Skills Are Critical to U.S. Competitiveness</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Schools Should Teach 21st Century Skills</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Implications</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Route 21: The One-Stop Shop on 21st Century Skills</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<b>8</b>

# Beyond the Three Rs

## Voter Attitudes toward 21st Century Skills

A new, nationwide poll of registered voters reveals that Americans are deeply concerned that the United States is not preparing young people with the skills they need to compete in the global economy.

A virtually unanimous **99 percent** of voters say that teaching students a wide range of 21st century skills—including critical thinking and problem-solving skills, computer and technology skills, and communication and self-direction skills—is important to our country's future economic success.

This strong and highly unusual consensus, which cuts across all socioeconomic classes, age groups and political affiliations, indicates that there is nearly universal agreement among Americans about the connection between 21st century skills and economic—and individual—competitiveness.

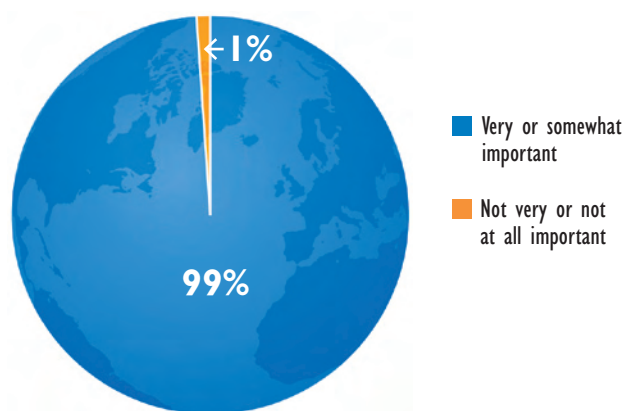


An overwhelming **80 percent** of voters say that the kind of skills students need to learn to be prepared for the jobs of the 21st century is different from what they needed 20 years ago.

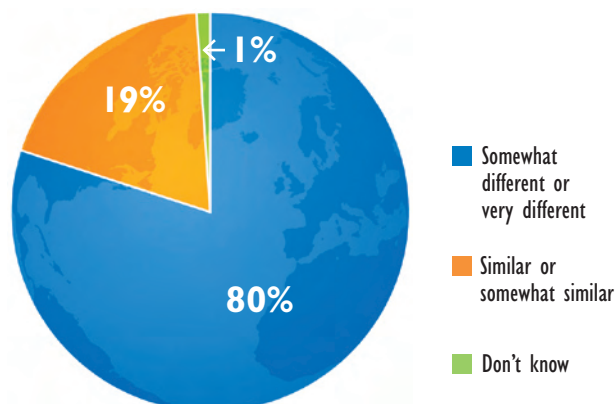
The findings indicate that Americans understand that the economy has changed and that, without skills that reflect today's workforce demands, young people may face tougher challenges earning a living wage and maintaining U.S. competitiveness than previous generations did. And, while Americans believe schools have not kept pace with changing times, a resounding majority (88 percent) believes schools can and should incorporate 21st century skills into their curriculum.

This report presents the key findings of the outcomes of voter attitudes on public education.

**How important to our country's future economic success is teaching and learning 21st century skills?**



**To be prepared for the jobs of the 21st century, do you think the kinds of things a student needs to learn in school are very similar, somewhat similar, somewhat different or very different from what a student needed to learn 20 years ago?**



Source: Public Opinion Strategies and Peter D. Hart Research Associates



## Young People Need More than the Three Rs

Voters continue to believe that traditional, basic skills are vital. Indeed, reading comprehension ranks highest in importance among voters polled. Americans seem to recognize that literacy remains a fundamental gateway skill for learning core academic content, acquiring 21st century skills and performing on the job.

**However, 66 percent of voters say they believe that students need more than just the basics of reading, writing, math and science. Schools also need to incorporate a broader range of skills into core academic content.**

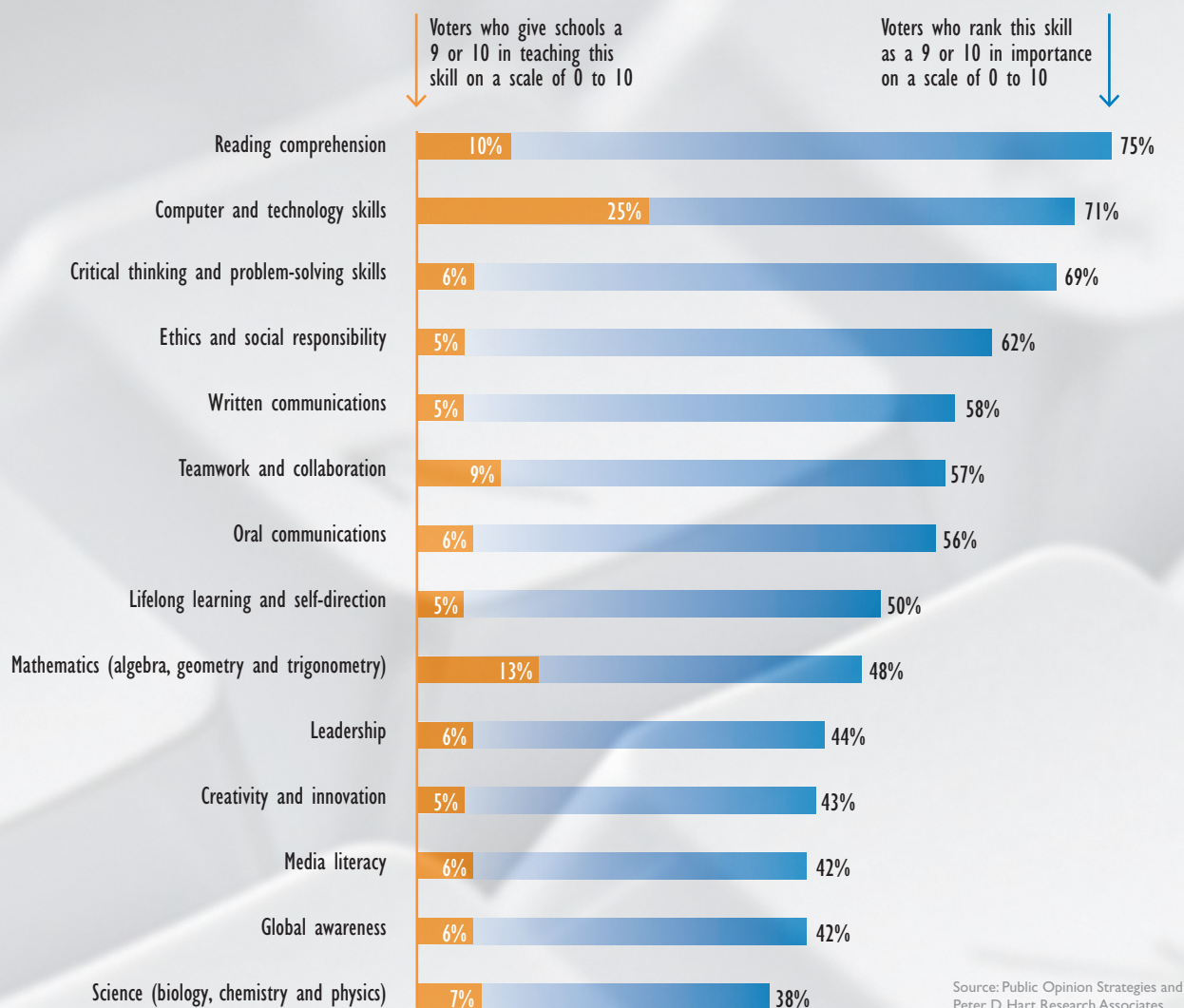
Voters applaud schools for embracing and incorporating computer and technology skills into the classroom, with 71 percent saying that this is an important skill set and 25 percent saying schools do a commendable job at teaching these skills.

But there is a collection of other, different kinds of skill sets that voters believe are critically important today as well—skills that voters say are not yet being taught well in schools. In fact, there is a serious disconnect between the skills that Americans recognize as valuable and the effectiveness of the preparation they believe students are getting.

At the same time, voter attitudes clearly have shifted away from the “back to basics” movement that was a strong theme for school improvement during the 1990s. Today, the majority of voters (74 percent) say they believe schools should place at least an equal emphasis on 21st century skills and basic skills. About one-fifth of this majority (21 percent) believe schools should place a total emphasis on 21st century skills.



## Gaps between Skills Voter Value and How Well Schools Teach These Skills

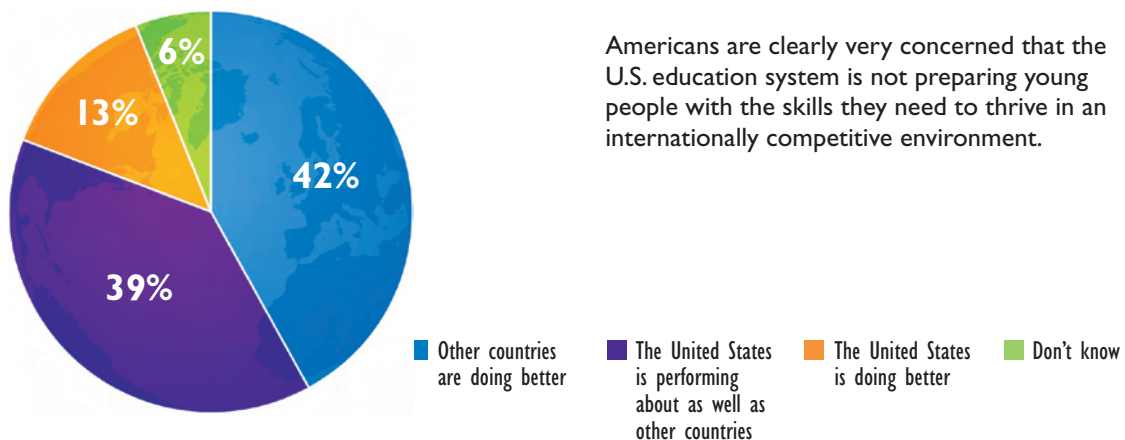


Voter attitudes clearly have shifted away from the “back to basics” movement that was a strong theme for school improvement during the 1990s.



## 21st Century Skills Are Critical to U.S. Competitiveness

**Would you say that other developed countries are doing a better job than the United States preparing their children for the jobs of the 21st century, that the United States is doing a better job than other developed countries preparing our children for the jobs of the 21st century, or that the United States is performing about as well as other developed countries?**



Source: Public Opinion Strategies and Peter D. Hart Research Associates

**Fifty percent** of voters say they believe the country is moving in the wrong direction in educating young people with the skills they need to compete in a global economy.

Nearly as many (**42 percent**) say they believe that other developed countries are doing a better job than the United States of preparing their children for the jobs of the 21st century, while 39 percent believe the United States is performing about as well as other countries and only 13 percent believe the United States is doing better than other countries.

Americans are clearly very concerned that the U.S. education system is not preparing young people with the skills they need to thrive in an internationally competitive environment.

## VOTERS, EMPLOYERS AGREE ON 21ST CENTURY SKILLS

The findings of this poll of voter attitudes mirror a similar study in 2006 of employers by The Conference Board, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, Corporate Voices for Working Families and the Society for Human Resource Management.

In that study, *Are They Really Ready to Work?*, employers said that the future U.S. workforce is “woefully ill-prepared for the demands of today’s (and tomorrow’s) workforce” and they cited 21st century skills as “very important” to success at work.

[www.21stcenturyskills.org](http://www.21stcenturyskills.org)



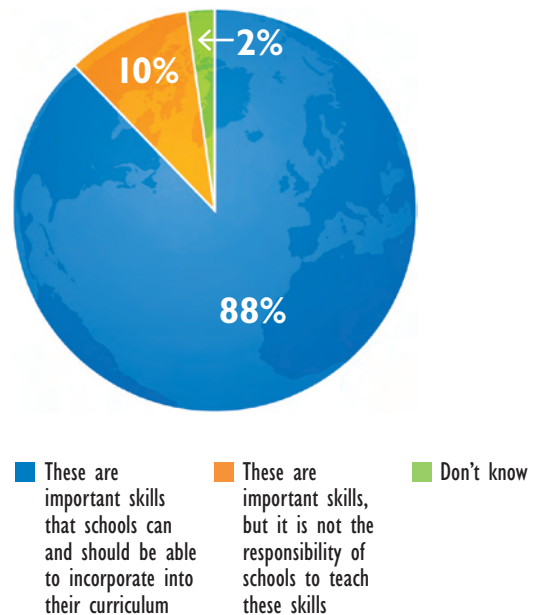
## Schools Should Teach 21st Century Skills

An overwhelming **88 percent** of voters say they believe that schools can and should incorporate 21st century skills into their curriculum. This is a clear vote of confidence that schools can rise to the educational challenges they strongly believe the nation faces.

Yet **60 percent** say that schools have done only a fair or poor job meeting the needs of students and the U.S. workforce in the 21st century.

Voters do not fault schools for failing to teach 21st century skills now. In fact, the majority (**53 percent**), give their local schools positive grades—an A or a B. Parents among the voters polled are even more generous with their rating of local schools, with 63 percent grading them with an A or a B. Americans apparently believe that schools are focused on the job they are tasked to do—mainly, developing basic skills.

**Are 21st century skills, such as computer and technology skills, critical thinking, self-direction and communication skills important for schools to teach?**



Source: Public Opinion Strategies and Peter D. Hart Research Associates

**“How can the United States continue to compete in a global economy if the entering workforce is made up of high school graduates who lack the skills they need, and of college graduates who are mostly ‘adequate’ rather than ‘excellent’?”**

— *Are They Really Ready to Work?*

## Implications

It is rare in a poll of voter attitudes to discover an issue upon which virtually all Americans agree. This poll reveals undivided, even fervent, support for incorporating 21st century skills into teaching and learning in the nation's schools.



**Americans are hungry for action on this issue, which they believe is intrinsically related to the nation's economic competitiveness and to the future prosperity of their children and grandchildren.**

This poll validates the work of the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, the leading national advocacy organization working to infuse 21st century skills into core academic subjects and throughout all educational support systems, including standards and assessments, curriculum and instruction, professional development and learning environments. The Partnership's vision of a 21st century education resonates with educators, employers and policymakers around the country. This poll indicates that the public is captivated by this vision of 21st century expectations and outcomes for students as well.

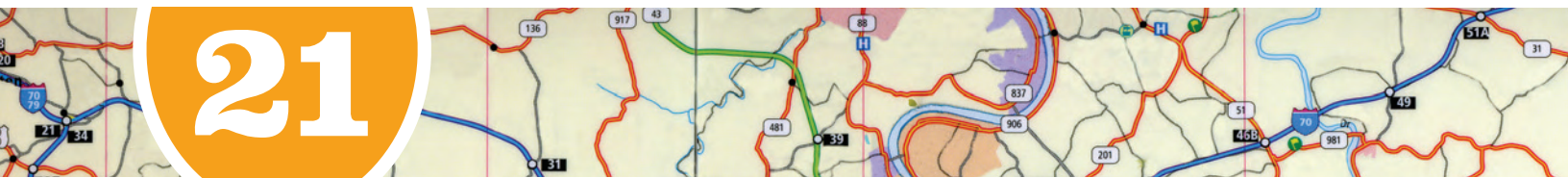
Twenty-first century skills must be an integral part of teaching and learning of all academic subjects, not add-ons to the curriculum. Making this happen will require transforming classroom practice, so that students learn to apply critical thinking skills in the context of learning math, for example, or work in collaborative teams on a geography project or use scientific technology to explore the environment. In other words, the basics and 21st century skills are not at cross-purposes: They are complementary.

The Partnership believes that schools have a critical role to play in teaching 21st century skills. But changing the direction, nature and results of schooling on a grand scale is beyond the capacity of local schools alone. The U.S. education system needs to step up to the plate and deliver on 21st century skills outcomes. It will take national and state leadership to position U.S. schools—and students—to compete internationally.

This poll also validates the bold actions of six states—Maine, Massachusetts, North Carolina, South Dakota, West Virginia and Wisconsin—that have joined the Partnership's State Leadership Initiative to develop statewide strategies for infusing 21st century skills into education.

Finally, this poll presents federal, state and local policymakers with a tremendous opportunity to make the U.S. education system more robust, rigorous and relevant for students. Without a doubt, the nation is behind them.





## Route 21: The One-Stop Shop on 21st Century Skills

To help education leaders implement 21st century teaching and learning, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills has developed Route 21, an online, one-stop shop for 21st century skills information, resources and community tools.



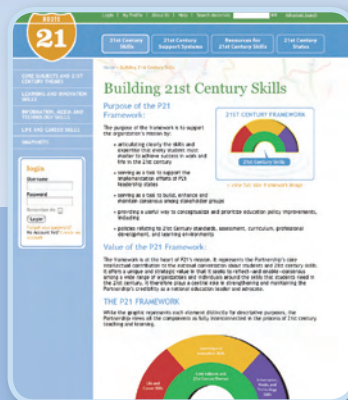
The site represents the go-to online resource for high-quality content, best practices, relevant reports, articles and research to assist practitioners in implementing 21st century teaching and learning outcomes.

Web 2.0 features allow users to tag, rank, organize, collect and share Route 21 content based on their personal interests. Individuals will continually update the site with relevant examples as well as share their reactions and insights on implementation of 21st century skills in their states, districts or schools.

To learn more about Route 21, visit [www.21stcenturyskills.org/route21/](http://www.21stcenturyskills.org/route21/).



▲ Route 21 home page



▲ 21st Century Skills section



▲ Resources for 21st Century Skills

## Acknowledgments

**The Partnership for 21st Century Skills wishes to acknowledge the following sponsors for their generous contribution to the financial underwriting of this poll and report:**



### **Blackboard Inc.**

Blackboard provides a suite of learning management products that enable K-12 institutions to deliver engaging and individualized teaching and learning opportunities. Blackboard's learning technologies empower schools and districts to create vibrant, virtual learning communities that engage all stakeholders in the learning process; deploy relevant and effective content that will positively impact student learning; and build internal capabilities, such as online professional development, to ensure highly effective teaching.



### **KnowledgeWorks Foundation**

KnowledgeWorks Foundation funds, facilitates and empowers communities throughout the nation to improve education. With a focus on transforming the national education landscape based on forecasts of future education needs, the foundation employs education experts and enlists innovative partners to equip the nation to thrive in a global competition for talent and knowledge.



### **National Education Association**

The National Education Association (NEA), the nation's largest professional employee organization, is committed to advancing the cause of public education. NEA's 3.2 million members work at every level of education—from pre-school to university graduate programs. NEA has affiliate organizations in every state and in more than 14,000 communities across the United States.



### **Pearson**

Pearson is an international media company with world-leading businesses in education, business information and consumer publishing.



### **SAP**

SAP is the world's leading provider of business software. More than 41,200 customers in more than 120 countries run SAP® applications—from distinct solutions addressing the needs of small and midsize enterprises to suite offerings for global organizations.



## ABOUT THE PARTNERSHIP FOR 21ST CENTURY SKILLS

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills is the leading advocacy organization focused on infusing 21st century skills into education. The organization brings together the business community, education leaders and policymakers to define a powerful vision for 21st century education and to ensure that students emerge from our schools with the skills needed to be effective citizens, workers and leaders in the 21st century.

## ABOUT THE POLL

The poll of 800 registered voters was conducted Sept. 10 to 12, 2007, by Public Opinion Strategies and Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the Partnership for 21st Century Skills.

More information on the polling results is available at [www.21stcenturyskills.org](http://www.21stcenturyskills.org).



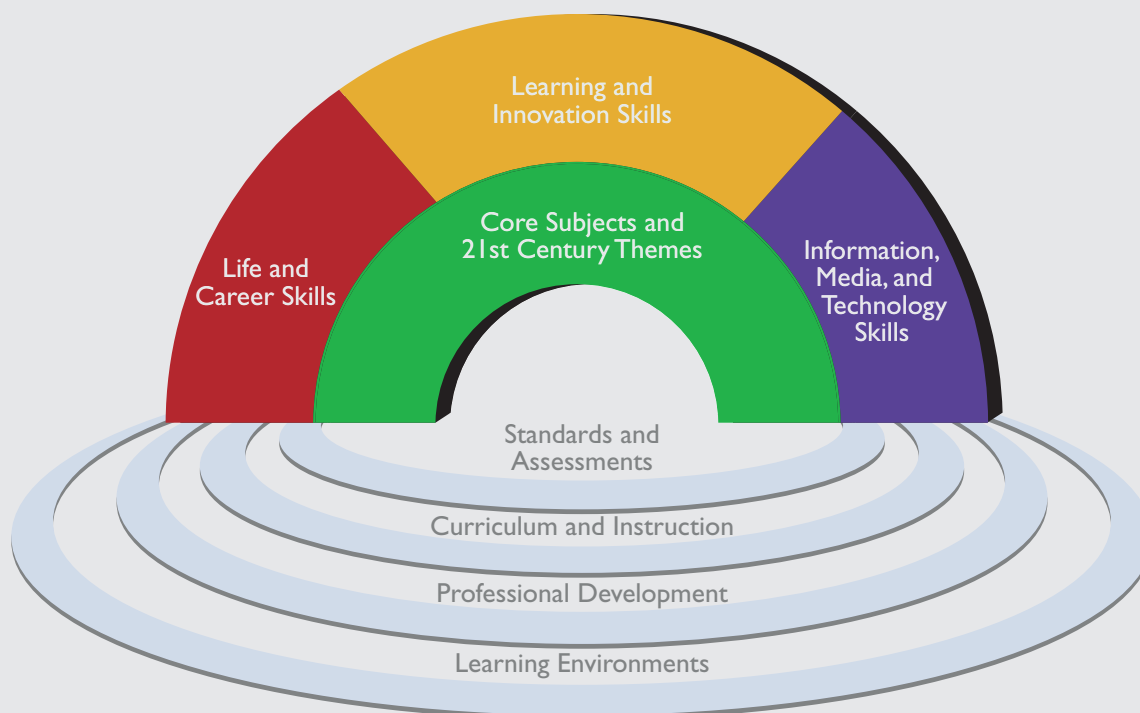
PARTNERSHIP FOR  
21ST CENTURY SKILLS

**Partnership Management**  
Infotech Strategies

**Writing**  
Martha Vockley, Vockley\*Lang

**Graphic Design**  
Amy Burnham Greiner, AB Graphic Design

## Framework for 21st Century Learning



The Partnership for 21st Century Skills has developed a vision for 21st century learning in the global economy. To learn more about 21st century student outcomes and support systems, visit [www.21stcenturyskills.org](http://www.21stcenturyskills.org).



PARTNERSHIP FOR  
21ST CENTURY SKILLS